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Reflections of An Adult Educator

BY TAMSEN MURRAY

One of the greatest blessings in the Christian life is to know that your life and/or words impact the life of another person. I shall never forget the feelings of amazement and awe that simultaneously enveloped me early in my years of ministry the first time I heard one of the young people in the youth group repeat one of my frequently used phrases. I was amazed that he or she had in fact been listening to me, all external evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Sobering self-examination quickly followed: Were those entrusted to my ministry hearing the *right* things?

In more recent years, there was the experience of teaching a singles class over a period of time long enough that the subject of stewardship made its second run through the congregational calendar. Financial matters are touchy enough for most folk, but throw in the element of single parenthood in the expensive marketplace of southern California, and the teacher must be prepared to face a less than enthusiastic audi-

ence. Imagine the joy of hearing a longtime member of the class quote advice she had given another single parent: Begin *somewhere* in giving to the Lord's work and set goals to increase that giving as the Lord enables. She was not just echoing words I had said on more than one occasion—she was testifying to their truth in her own experience.

A few months ago, I listened as a minister's wife who had known me as a junior high camper introduced me as the speaker for a women's ministry event. Sitting beside me was a dear friend who, with her husband, had been a rock of support and encouragement in my first ministry. Also seated in the audience were two of my former students, now actively involved in leadership ministry with children and youth in that church. It was a special moment—a moment of reflecting with gratitude on those who have played a role in educating me and on the privilege that has been mine to pass that education on to others who are now planting the seeds of the gospel in still others.

Only one of these personal memories is specifically related to adult education in the church, but all reflect the blessing that comes when one becomes aware of having influenced the life of another in a positive way for Christ—of enhancing that person's growth toward spiritual maturity. For centuries, believers who by grace have taken up the cloak of responsibility to teach what they have been taught about our Lord in his word to men and women or girls and boys who in turn will teach others (2 Tim 2:1, 2) have experienced this rich blessing.

Most of the congregations with which I have been associated have placed tremendous emphasis on ministering to children and youth. The Christian colleges with which I am most familiar are expected by both students and constituent churches to provide courses and, preferably, a major in youth ministry. At least some courses in children's ministry are expected as well.

But adult education seems to be a minor blip on the radar screen of our

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corporate consciousness in both congregations and colleges. Whereas children (and, to a lesser extent, teenagers) are seen as high-maintenance individuals who require much attention and programming, adults are viewed as people who tend to take care of themselves. Certainly, the developmental (and even anecdotal) evidence is compelling: most persons who accept Christ do so before they become adults. The formative years of childhood and adolescence represent the most open windows of opportunity for evangelism.

Having said that, however, it seems to this writer that in many cases congregations have thrown up their hands and resigned themselves to the “fact” that adults can’t be reached with or for the gospel. To say that most of the people who accept Christ do so before they become adults is not to say that most adults will not be receptive to the gospel because they have already passed those formative years when such decisions are made. It is not difficult to construct a lengthy list of critical life decisions made during the life cycle of an adult. Certainly, the quality of those decisions ordinarily reflects the nature and content of one’s early training, but it is not uncommon for men and women to change life directions during their adult years. And it is during those times of change—even crisis—that

adults are receptive to the transforming power of the gospel.

Therefore, I believe that enhancing the spiritual formation of adults is a critical challenge facing churches in the closing years of this century. Further, I believe that congregations should embrace a teaching ministry to adults with the same fervor currently associated with teaching children and young people. In order to do that, however, churches must address some erroneous points of view that have shaped our thinking about adult education. We shall examine evidence to the contrary, especially within the larger educational community of our nation. It is also important to identify the immediate and long-range benefits of a more vigorous focus on adult education in the church.

First, what are some erroneous stereotypes we might find about adults? Adults are not a homogeneous population, for one thing. Given the present life expectancy rates in the United States, most of us can reasonably expect to be adults for a longer period of time than the combined years of our childhood and adolescence. An educator who fails to understand that the developmental challenges facing a five-year-old are not the same as those facing a fifteen-year-old will hardly be viewed as credible. Yet, in reality, the developmental challenges facing a twenty-five-year-old differ dramati-

cally from those facing a thirty-five-year-old or a forty-five-year-old, to say nothing of a seventy-five-year-old. In fact, the developmental challenges facing a cohort of twenty-five-year-olds will not be identical; marital status, parenthood, career position, and level of education are just a few of the possible variables within the cohort. There is potential for a much wider range of challenges within a group of adults who are all the same age than there is in a group of children who are all the same age.

For example, I and most of my colleagues are “Early Baby Boomers.” But in the space of about eighteen months, one of my friends became a first-time grandparent, adopted a six-year-old foster child, and had to place his mother in a skilled nursing facility. Another has two daughters—one in eighth grade and one about to start kindergarten. And neither of them feels the same pressure as the colleague whose father and father-in-law died unexpectedly within a span of six weeks; the care for her mother and mother-in-law while her son is finishing college has presented special challenges. A friend once used the term “sandwich generation” in describing the pressure of coping with raising teenagers and caring for aging parents at the same time. I think it’s an apt description.

Therefore, the church desiring to minister to adults cannot afford to assume a lockstep age-group approach to class formation. Life-event groupings may be a more beneficial way of enhancing the spiritual formation of adults—parents of preschoolers, parents of teenagers, empty nesters, and so on. Better yet, in my opinion, is an intergenerational approach wherein Paul’s instructions in Titus 2 can be “lived out” in an educational setting—older men and

women mentoring (to use a current buzzword) younger men and women.

Another stereotype about adults that churches may assume is that they already know the Bible or aren't interested in learning anything more. Certainly, there is ample societal evidence of the interest of adults in learning. Every week the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Orange County Register* (as well as countless other newspapers across the nation, I'm sure) are peppered with advertisements that target adult learners. Practically every private college or university in southern California is competing for the attention of working adults who wish to finish or enhance their degrees. One ad says, "Your industry is changing. Your company is changing. Your job is changing. How about you?" It emphasizes "our unique one-course-a-month format . . . [and] our flexible day and nighttime schedules" as evidence that everything about its program "is designed for you—the working adult." Another university says, "Completing your bachelor's degree is the best investment you'll ever make" and notes that its program is designed for working professionals. My own university's ad says, "Dream of being a teacher, counselor, executive or advancing your career? Finish your bachelor's degree in 18 months." And I have even received a mailing from one of those other universities, looking for qualified adjunct faculty. Nontraditional education for the working adult is a growth business in higher education today and is characterized by creative scheduling, courses with a definite beginning and ending, and, frequently, a cohort of individuals who stay together and learn together for the duration of the program through a fixed sequence of classes.

What might the church learn from this phenomenon? Adults perceive a need for additional and ongoing education in order to meet the challenges of a constantly changing marketplace; such education need not be limited to technical or business expertise. Spiritual education is also assuredly needed to enhance one's life skills. Short courses with clearly stated calendar parameters may be an effective "hook" to bring adults into the church's educational setting. Adult education in the church need not be totally teacher-centered, either; adult learners bring a wealth of experience in a wide variety of contexts to the learning environment. Their contributions can be of immense benefit to all of the learners.

A recent note in *Leadership* listed the top spiritual needs of Americans today, based on a list developed by pollster/researcher George Gallup Jr. (Spring 1998, p. 11):

1. To believe that life is meaningful and has a purpose
2. To have a sense of community and deeper relationships
3. To be appreciated and respected
4. To be listened to
5. To feel they are growing in faith
6. To get practical help in developing a mature faith

One would be hard pressed, in my opinion, to develop a more compelling argument for the importance of adult education in American churches today. Consider, for example, the fourth statement: To be listened to. It is difficult to imagine that needs being met in a setting other than some kind of smaller, more intimate group than large-scale corporate worship.

I have family members who attend a very large church in Texas. I find it interesting that when they talk about their church experience, they are far more likely to wax enthusiastic about their Sunday school class than about the music or the preaching. The music and the preaching are quite good, mind you, but they don't provide fellowship with other believers to the same extent as does their Sunday school class. That congregation has four worship services every Sunday morning; there is a full slate of adult classes during the second and third of those four services. Adult education is important there.

And that has proven beneficial to the church, I believe. There is a long-term return to the kingdom when a congregation invests heavily in children's education. Lives are shaped into the image of Christ very early on. But the congregation itself may or may not directly benefit from that investment—and the return will not be realized for many years. Children's ministry costs—it requires a disproportionate share of a congregation's financial and human resources. An adult class with twenty-five in attendance can function fairly well with only one teacher; a similar number of learners in a class of four-year-olds can spell big trouble for one teacher working alone! Likewise, a congregation that invests heavily in ministry to youth will not see immediate return on the investment; certainly, the offerings will not match the expenses.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that churches ought to stop investing in children's ministry or youth ministry. But the reality of church life is such that there can be a more immediate return on an investment in adult education. Adults are in a far better position to begin

supporting the ministries of the church financially than are children or teenagers. The educational setting provides greater opportunity for targeted instruction, dialogue, and testimony about the stewardship of one's life and resources than is generally possible in the corporate worship setting. Another way in which the investment in adult education pays a more immediate dividend is in recruiting and developing leaders to staff the various ministries of the church. Congregations that place a higher priority on children's or youth ministry to the virtual exclusion of adult education soon begin to have difficulty in finding able and willing volunteers to staff those ministries. There is no "feeder system," if you will.

Perhaps the church should borrow a page or two from those local colleges and universities and begin to market the advantages of adult education programs. "Your industry is changing. Your company is changing. Your job is changing. Your family is changing. How about you?" Or this approach: "Looking for a place where you are appreciated, respected, and listened to? Where you can gain practical help in developing a maturing faith?" Reorienting our thoughts about adult education in the church is vital to individual and corporate survival in the coming century. Not only must we communicate the benefits more creatively, we also must be aggressive in developing various ways of delivering

quality learning to the men and women who venture through the door.

The adult educator is eager to tackle the challenge. I would like for my congregation to be known for excellence in providing quality learning opportunities for her adults. Will you join the ranks of those who refuse to give up on adults, those who believe in reaching them through the educational ministry of the church?

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